

TALKING TURKEY IN ALBUQUERQUE:

A FEW OBSERVATIONS ON THE 1997 CONFERENCE

Paul G. Bahn

THE 4TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE concerning Easter Island (following Hanga Roa 1984, Frankfurt 1989 and Laramie 1993) took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, from August 5 to 10, under the title "South Seas Symposium: Easter Island in the Pacific Context", and can be counted a great success, having attracted over 200 participants from about 18 countries and every continent. Although, as at Laramie, the vast majority of those present were from the USA, it was again gratifying to see how many Rapanui—dignitaries, scholars, artisans and entertainers—were able to make the journey, often at their own expense. It is also safe to say that, with only a very few exceptions, every major researcher currently active in the field of Easter Island studies was present or represented. The quality of the event was due in large measure to the organizing skills of the Easter Island Foundation (Barbara Hinton, Georgia Lee & co), Far Horizons (Mary Dell Lucas and company) and, for the academic program, Christopher Stevenson, who was addressed in a recent fax from French colleagues as "Dear Christ"—do they know something we don't?

The sessions were held initially in the Woodward Hall of the University of New Mexico, but had to be moved to the Geology Department after a massive power failure on the first afternoon, caused perhaps by some angry witch's curse, blacked out the chosen venue for the duration. One result of this was that we were located even further from the already remote room allotted to book and art sales. Curiously, there seemed to be little or no interest in the event on the part of the local media, or even the university. Where was the equivalent of the *Laramie Daily Boomerang* which gave such strong coverage to the previous congress?

The papers given covered a wide spectrum, from linguistics to body decoration, from craniometry and DNA to stone tools, and they were arranged in sessions which some sadist had decreed should begin at 8 a.m. every day. So many papers were presented that, as at Laramie, sessions ran concurrently on a couple of days, making it impossible to attend everything. All were limited to 20 minutes except that—again, as at Laramie—Thor Heyerdahl was given far longer (or did it just seem that way?).

As I said in my Laramie report (RNJ 7 (3), Sept. 1993, p. 46), one readily acknowledges Heyerdahl's seminal contributions in this field, which probably lie at the roots of most participants' interest in the subject, including my own. Once again, as at Laramie, he was the only person to give an evening talk to the public, and one must salute his generosity in donating the proceeds from this lecture to help with the transportation costs of less affluent delegates. Incidentally, the flyer advertising his talk claimed that he "electrified the world with reports from the Kon Tiki, his reed boat expedition from

Chile to Easter Island"—some mistake, surely?

Conversely, his approach to the subject is still something like a game of "snap" with objects and motifs taken out of time and context, and then subjectively judged for similarity. This is the case, for example, with the notorious Túcume clay frieze, where Heyerdahl's ability to read whatever he wants (reed boats, cabins, circular eggs) into highly ambiguous designs leaves one totally non-plussed.

Moreover, after reading Heyerdahl's contemptuous dismissal of John Flenley's dating evidence for reeds being on the island for at least 30,000 years (RNJ 11(1), March, p.19), and after witnessing their public exchange of views on this matter at Albuquerque, one is left utterly speechless by Heyerdahl's frequent public appeals for open-mindedness, which ring somewhat hollow—indeed, they remind one of Madonna singing about virginity. . . .

Perhaps the most amazing moment among many came at the end of Heyerdahl's evening talk to around 300 members of the paying public, when a belligerent and vociferous Rapanui, Terai Huckle Atan, shouted two very good questions from the back of the hall—i.e. why, if the theory of Peruvian origins was correct, there was no maize on Easter Island and why he, Atan, could not make himself understood in Peru!

Heyerdahl's reply, which caused not a few jaws to plummet to the ground, was that the South Americans had been Polynesian-speaking before the Incas wiped them out. Polite words fail me, unfortunately, at this point.

On a more positive note Steve Fischer paid a fulsome warts-and-all tribute to the recently deceased Thomas Barthel, while Helene Martinsson-Wallin noted the passing of Bengt Danielsson on this, the 50th anniversary of the Kon Tiki expedition. There were some notable highlights in the program -- for example, Fischer's presentation of his discovery of cosmogonies in most *rongo rongo* texts; Douglas Owsley's graphic and eye-opening account of traumas in Easter Island human skeletal material; Grant McCall's tour de force about islanders who left Rapanui, through force or choice; and a chance to see Catherine Orliac's excellent video about the Toromiro project. Other noteworthy events included an opening recital by the extremely gifted pianist Mahani Teave, only 14 years old; Joan Seaver Kurze's stunning exhibition of island carvings at the Maxwell Museum; and several shows by the Jimmy Crossan dance troupe, especially their last at the closing banquet in Mountainair.

Unlike in Laramie, however, there was no truly outstanding group of papers, and no new theory was put forward -- unless one counts McCall's view, already mentioned in RNJ 11 (3) p. 112, that the island was the centre of a trading empire between Polynesia and South America, which one can only assume is decidedly tongue-in-cheek. The overall impression is that we are in a phase of consolidation and re-assessment; and indeed Patrick Chapman and George Gill—two of the leading proponents of the "Laramie hypothesis" (see RNJ 7 (3), p. 47)—seem to be shifting position, with Chapman now leaning heavily towards the Tuamotus as a point of origin, and



M. Eugenia Santa Coloma from Spain and Paul Bahn at the Maxwell exhibit.
Photo: K. Cleghorn

Gill emphasising that the supposedly Amerindian discrete cranial traits may in fact prove to exist elsewhere, as analyses are expanded to other areas of the Pacific and beyond. Similarly, John Flenley and myself are happy to incorporate not only David Steadman's data of faunal extinction but also McCall's "Little Ice Age hypothesis" into the model of environmental destruction.

The crucial problem which remains—and which must become a top priority for organisers of the next conference—is that of the need for translation into Spanish. This was already noted in Laramie (RNJ 7 (3), p. 45), but since simultaneous translation is prohibitively expensive, and since no registrants ticked the relevant box on the application form, nothing was done this time—with the result that, once again, the islanders present could understand little of what was being said, and some felt slighted and ignored. Once again, the conference was about them, not for them.

If simultaneous translation proves too expensive the next time, some other solution will be needed—such as allowing five minutes at the end of each presentation for a summary to be read in Spanish (or in English for papers in Spanish). It was also widely felt that questions and discussion should occur after each paper rather than be delayed till the end of a full session. This might entail longer slots for each paper, and/or more concurrent sessions—but not necessarily. On the basis of both Laramie and Albuquerque, I would suggest that papers could easily be limited to a 15 minute presentation—after all, one should be able to convey the gist of a problem and of one's results in that time, bearing in mind that the audience are not all specialists and are not interested in minutiae and detailed figures, which can be left to the published version.

Several papers at Albuquerque were intensely boring for this very reason, and should have been simplified, shortened or actually turned down. Session organisers could perhaps be more ruthless in future admissions, maintaining academic excellence without sacrificing general interest. There is certainly a case to be made for a more rigorous selection procedure which would, for example, have weeded out the unedifying and sycophantic hagiography that was presented on the last morning and which contributed nothing to a supposedly scientific conference.

In short, we need good papers which are relevant and new; we need speakers who do not put everyone to sleep (in my opinion, papers should never be read out if this can be avoided); but above all, we need some means of making future meetings bilingual in order fully to integrate and honour, and to avoid alienating, the inhabitants of the island which lies at the centre of our enterprise and our endeavours.

This was the last such conference of the century, but these events have already become a tradition, and will certainly continue well into the next century, as the spirit of international scholarly cooperation and multidisciplinary debate that makes them so enjoyable and valuable is maintained and expanded. ■

Letters to the Editor



Dear Editor,

I would like to respond to the International News item

that you included in the June RNJ (Vol. 11, 2) regarding the Christies' sale of the van Lier collection. First of all, as a serious private collector of Polynesian art in the United States, I would like to correct some items in this report. To start with, the van Lier collection did have some wonderful objects but the strength was in the New Guinea and related material and certainly not in the Polynesian objects. The Easter Island material in his collection was very late and was nothing more than island trade curios of the last 19th and 20th century—and decadent at best. If the pieces had been of the 18th or early 19th century, the figural sculpture would have attracted serious interest and brought in excess of well over \$100,000 each. But instead these pieces were purchased by new collectors or novices who had not carefully studied the material culture of Easter Island. The staff, which sold for the reported \$1,200, was of this late curio period; had it been an authentic object of the late 18th or early 19th century it would have sold in excess of \$50,000.

The Solomon Islands' shield again had problems in the respect that it may be the last one to ever come on the market, hence the \$180,000 price, but it attracted very little support from the European and American trade as it was, in the opinion of most knowledgeable experts, a rather weak example and certainly the most uninteresting of the known surviving pieces as to iconography and inlay form.

In my opinion, one of the few truly Oceanic-related masterworks in the sale was the superb Dyak bowl, representing the best in Dyak art. This piece sold for many times its high estimate and was sold to a well-known Austrian collector with great taste.

In your report it is stated that "never before have such prices been paid for ethnographic treasures." This is false: Christies, Sothebys, Phillips, and Bonhams have sold Oceanic objects for considerably more money than the items in the van Lier collection.

In closing, I would like to say that traditional objects from Polynesia are very rare and when excellent examples appear on the market (which is very seldom these days) the prices continue to escalate. For example, a really great *moai kavakava* of the 18th century would bring well over \$300,000 today. At the peak of the market in 1990/1991, a *rapa* paddle from Easter Island was sold to a private French collector for the equivalent of \$440,000. So the objects and prices in the van Lier collection were, for the most part, not so great after all!

Mark Blackburn, Hilo, Hawaii.



Dear Editor,

Jo Anne Van Tilburg adds another important contribution to how the giant stone statues of Easter Island were transported, as reported in RNJ 10(4), 1996. I have a few questions, however. Van Tilburg states that, in her computer simulation, statue 01/53 ("reference *moai*") was moved in a supine position on a "simple sledge" constructed of two nonparallel wood beams (logs), 5 meters long and 10 cm in diameter. It appears to me that a much larger log than 10 cm diameter would be required to move the ten ton *moai*. She states, "The beams which add no appreciable weight to the transport task are held in place by the weight of the statue